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THE BURDEN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

BY SIR WALTER BESANT.

WHEN the nineteenth century reached its appointed end, the bells rang out in joyous peal, as for the accession of a new sovereign. They rang for the boys and the young men. For those whom the new-comer found grey-bearded and stricken with years, the bells were as the rolling of muffled drums; for them the bells proclaimed a funeral, rather than a coronation. Their youth and lustihood belong to the century that has just gone; well for them if their work does not also belong to the years that are past!

As I write this paper I find myself, naturally, speaking from an English point of view. In many ways, American readers will contrast their own institutions with ours. They will perceive that we have been steadily, yet often unconsciously, drifting more and more toward their ways and their views. I shall abstain from commenting on things distinctively American, because they are American and not English. Most of the "burden" of which I speak is our own, but the most important part of it—that which concerns the whole of humanity—is, above all, American.

The burden of the nineteenth century, so far as England is concerned, may be summed up in two clauses:

- (1.) It had to get rid of its predecessor;
- (2.) It had to prepare the way for its successor.

That is to say, it inherited a mass of ideas, prejudices, practices, inequalities, evils of every kind, which had, somehow, before anything new could be attempted, to be unloaded and shovelled into the dust bin. It had, next, to prepare for its successor by founding and beginning many new things: by the extension of education; by the developments of science; by the preaching and teaching of wider views as to civil rights and responsibilities; by the application to philanthropy of methods formed upon a study

of human laws and tendencies, and by many other ways of which it was itself, perhaps, unconscious.

The separation from the eighteenth century was not, with us, complete, because we retained the forms of the old aristocracy, while we swept away its powers; and we kept the name of an Established Church, while we abolished its exclusive privileges. Yet the separation has been so great as to amount to a revolution more drastic even than that of the sixteenth century. And, as for the work of preparation for the present century, it was accompanied by an intellectual activity which has done even more for science than the Renaissance did for literature.

I desire, here, to show briefly how the breaking away from the eighteenth century was necessary before the practical application of the new ideas was possible; and how, when this had been partially accomplished, the achievements, the developments, the inventions, the discoveries and the research which followed have all been contributions to, and preparations for, the heritage of work which we are now handing on to our successors of the twentieth century.

Let us consider the work of destruction and the work of preparation as they went on, side by side, in a few of the main lines.

First, in the line of religion.

What we found, when the nineteenth century succeeded to the eighteenth, as the dominant religion, whether in the Church or among the Nonconformists, was a fiery, fierce and aggressive Calvinism. There are many still living who can remember the despair, the hopeless misery, of millions, due to the continued discussions and sermons on Free Will, Election and Predestination. I can myself recall the solemn voice of the preacher who warned us, almost every Sunday—remember that he firmly believed what he said—that but very few of his congregation had the least chance of being saved; that, from eternity, and before the world was made, nearly all of us were predestined to everlasting torture. Well, we have silenced these speculations; men of learning, men of science, men of culture, refuse any longer to discuss questions as unfathomable as that of the beginning and the end of space. This abandonment of Calvinism is part of our destructive work in religion.

That of construction, or of preparation, has not been so happy.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that, with the decay of the Cal-

vinistic school, and with the adoption of a more humane creed, there should be revived the old controversy of Man *versus* Priest.

The Church of England is now entering anew upon an acute form of that controversy—so acute that, if it is followed up, the Church will undoubtedly be rent in twain and the National Church will cease to exist. There are already within its divided fold two well formed camps: the one containing those who want no priest and will acknowledge no priestly pretensions; the other, those who find rest in the shelter of authority, accepting, as the price to be paid, the domination of the priest over their lives, their thoughts, their reason, their sense, and their philosophy. Before Disestablishment actually takes place, there will be mountains of literature to be read; there will be a flood of talk. But the most effective arguments will be those which show how, in the United States, not to speak of our great Colonies, religion takes no harm where there is no Established Church. Some of us will regret the loss of an institution venerable and beautiful; glorious for the saints and divines, the martyrs and confessors, the scholars and teachers who have adorned its history. But we shall let it go in full confidence that, as in America, so here, religion does not need a National Creed.

But the way for such a settlement of a quarrel, never to be adjusted while the disputants live under the same roof, had to be prepared, and it has taken us a hundred years of work, mostly unconscious work, in that direction. First, the claims of the sacerdotal party were advanced, formulated, defended, and, as far as possible, made popular. This was done with great craft and subtlety. Its advocates enlisted on their side the growing desire for art in everything: beauty in buildings; beauty in ritual; beauty in decoration; beauty in dress. The priestly pretensions were concealed behind the attraction of services which no longer offended the artistic and æsthetic sense.

On the other hand, the old intolerance, which drove the Nonconformist out of society, had to be wholly swept away. This, if you think of it, was part of the necessary preparation for the schism of the immediate future. Formerly, a Nonconformist could not enter the House of Commons; nor could he hold any municipal office; nor could he accept a commission in the Army or in the Navy; nor could he take a degree at Oxford or Cambridge; nor could he become a barrister; nor could he be married or buried,

except according to the rites of the Church of England. All this is now changed; every restriction has been removed; the former social inferiority of the Dissenter is vanishing, and things are nearly, if not quite, ready for the great measure of Disestablishment which is part of the Burden of the Twentieth Century.

Let us next turn to the Government. Here, indeed, not the pruning knife, but the axe, had to be applied. The eighteenth century bequeathed us government by an oligarchy. A small caste ruled the country. The very stronghold of liberty, the Folk Mote, the House of Commons, had been transformed into a stronghold of caste. The ruling party consisted of a few hundred families; there were hardly enough of them for the division of the spoils. They had seized and held for themselves all the power and all the places; they were Ministers and Secretaries of State; they ruled all the Departments; they commanded the army and the fleets; they commanded the regiments and the ships; all the posts of honor, all the distinctions, all the lucrative preferments were in the hands of the caste. The Ministry and the Opposition both belonged to the caste; the House of Commons was filled with younger sons of the caste; they sat on opposite sides, but they were agreed upon one point, viz.: that there should be no Reform of Parliament, and that the duty and privilege of carrying on the government belonged to themselves, by right divine.

It is, I believe, difficult to get an American, unless he is a student of history, to understand the conditions of government under which the nineteenth century began its work. It is equally difficult for him to understand the immense work of destruction and reconstruction that has been accomplished during the century. Both destruction and reconstruction have been carried through in the same direction. That is to say, every step has been a step forward toward the government of the people by the people. Thus the House of Commons now represents all people, including the caste itself, and every class, rank and degree of the people. There is, practically, universal suffrage in Great Britain; the Civil Service, the Army, and the Navy, are all thrown open to competition. We now see, not only the younger sons but also the peers themselves becoming candidates for election at County Councils, School Boards and Borough Councils; while the House of Lords, receiving every year new recruits from the middle class, has now become an assembly whose function is, practically, to take care

that important measures shall not be passed until they are clearly proved to be the will of the people.

This represents a good body of work. How far is it incomplete? And what remains for the twentieth century by way of completion in this branch?

There are two tasks, at least, before the new century, in carrying on the work of construction.

First, it is not enough to give the people the machinery of government; they must also be instructed in the use of the machinery. In other words, it is not enough to place the representation of the country in the hands of the people; the people must also be taught the duty of exercising their rights.

It would be, in fact, far better for the people even to continue in the hands of a ruling caste, who were at least patriotic and who had clean hands, than to be in the power of needy adventurers and interested demagogues who rise to power on the apathy, the ignorance, and the neglect of electors. The duty of the citizen is a lesson the teaching of which must be seriously undertaken, and, once begun, must be never again allowed to slip out of sight.

The other task is the opening up of all the intellectual careers to lads who are capable, clever, and ambitious; though their poverty has hitherto been an insuperable bar to their advancement. Everything, it is true, is nominally open. Practically, however, to the poor British lad, there are but two lines of life possible, outside the craft to which he belongs: he may become a teacher in a Board school; or a reporter and a journalist. Before the entrance gate of every profession, whether that of barrister, solicitor, physician, surgeon, officer, architect, artist, clergyman, or teacher of the higher class, there stands a turnpike, and at the gate is the turnpike man, whose name is Rhadamanthus. He comes out scowling, and holds out an inexorable hand: "Pay me a thousand pounds; if you cannot, you shall not enter here."

How can this inflexible guardian be abolished? That, you see, is part of the work of our successors. They must find out the way. Perhaps they may be induced to look across the ocean. There they will see colleges whose fees are low; where the cost of living is small, whose degrees in themselves confer the right to practice any profession, the art and mystery of which they teach. We must, on the one hand, teach our lads the dignity and the worthiness of crafts, arts, and industries, but we must throw

open the door to those lads who crave for the intellectual life and will be content with none other. We have already begun with ladders of scholarships, to lift such lads up to the level of the learned professions: but that is only a beginning.

The difficulty is one which belongs to the whole question of education. The nineteenth century inherited from its predecessor a baleful legacy in a general prejudice against education. It was thought highly dangerous to educate the people. This prejudice lingers yet in some quarters. We have so far got rid of it, however, that we enjoy at last a system of free national education, the right of every child. This is a great step; it sweeps away old ideas, as so much lumber; but it is only a step; it is a beginning. It opens a door to an empty hall: we have to furnish this hall. We have, in fact, to find out what national education should mean. For thirty years, we have been carrying on a succession of experiments, learning little or nothing from other countries, and paying small heed to their experience. I doubt if there is a single member of the London School Board who could pass an examination on the American system of national education, even though it is conceded, by all who have examined into it, to be better than our own. The history, however, of these experiments is a valuable asset in the heritage of our successors. They have still to invent, or to discover, a system of education broad enough, and elastic enough, to include not only the ambitious and clever lad, but also the children destined for crafts, industries, and arts of all kinds; one that will make them good citizens, not ignorant of their civic rights, and alive to their civic duties. At present, our School Boards, by means of classes in shorthand, classes in commercial law, classes in foreign languages, and in other things which do not belong to the crafts and arts, are doing their mischievous best to persuade the people that the life of a clerk, with its long hours, its drudgery, and its miserable pay, is better, more "respectable" and more dignified than the life of the engine-room and the workshop. No greater blunder was ever made in the history of National Education.

I come next to the important question of trades unions. Here, indeed, we have broken clean away from the eighteenth century; yet, still, we have as yet only made a beginning. It is, again, the opening of the door to empty chambers. "Covens," *i. e.*, combinations of craftsmen, were forbidden, and rigidly suppressed,

for seven hundred years in the City of London. With great difficulty, and only by persistence, we have succeeded in removing the legal prohibitions, bit by bit. The crafts can now form unions as much as they please. So far, we have prepared the way. We hand over to the twentieth century the trades unions, whose right to exist has been firmly established by ourselves. We hand over very little more than that right. It is a mass of raw material for our successors to work upon. Hitherto, the unions have had but one object, the exaction of shorter hours and higher pay. This has been the first exercise of their rights. It is, of course, a natural beginning. Just as on the simple instinct of self-preservation has been erected the whole structure of human society, with all its arts, inventions and discoveries; so, resting on the simple desire of greater ease and comfort, the trades unions were first created and have been successfully established. They are now, perhaps, ready for the higher developments. These will include jealousy for the craft itself, for its worthiness and its dignity; special education in the craft; pensions and sick funds for the craft; the maintenance of civic responsibilities and duties; an ever careful watch over the material interests of the craft, the weekly wage, the production, foreign competition, the markets, the trade interests, as protected by legislation; and the provision of arbitration when the two sides, hitherto irreconcilable—Capital and Labor—disagree. A very noble piece of work for the twentieth century!

If we turn next to the daily manners and customs, it is wonderful to consider in how many ways we have broken clean away from the eighteenth century. For instance, there are the old habits of drinking. At a certain election dinner, about the year 1790, the company, several hundreds in number, sat down at five o'clock and continued sitting over their wine and punch the whole night through. At the great City dinners it was not, formerly, unusual for men to drink three, and sometimes six, bottles of port; on Sunday morning, when the good folks were on their way to church, they would have to pass dozens of men, dead drunk, laid out on the pavement to recover in the cold air. Nay, this excessive drinking was carried on well into the middle of the century. I myself can remember, as a common sight, the bottle nose; the nose decorated with red blossoms; the pendulous nose, caused by punch and port. I have been assured by a veteran

officer that, when he joined his regiment in the thirties, he had to sit every evening for three hours after dinner, drinking port; and this at the age of sixteen! At Oxford and Cambridge, the resident Fellows used to sit over their port every evening for a couple of hours; the Colleges prided themselves on their port. A physician, who died in 1890 at the age of seventy-two, told me that, when he began to go into society, the dinners, which were simple, were finished by half past seven; that, after the dinner, the men sat over their port till eleven or so; that many of them drank their three bottles; that they then adjourned to the drawing-room, where they were offered hot brandy and water! He added that it was very rare for these toppers to get past the age of fifty.

At all events, we have changed all this. At the clubs, or the restaurants, it is rare, indeed, to find any one drinking wine after dinner. In private houses, I think, no one does so; at dinner parties, the sitting after the ladies has become a mere form—a survival of the old custom: our ancestors will, no doubt, be grateful to us for introducing this moderation. It is, however, like all our work, incomplete: we have yet to teach the working man to combat his perpetual thirst, which is but a bad habit, not a disease. At present, he is ready at all times of the day for his “half pint.” We have checked or destroyed drunkenness in our Navy; we have been unable, so far, to destroy it in the Army. In the lowest classes, in the city slums, drinking is still common among the women. There is a great deal to be done in this branch, even though much has already been done. Of late years, our own activity in the cause of temperance may compare favorably with the American endeavors in the same direction.

Drinking is only one of the customs we have improved. Remember that the eighteenth century gave us, as a part of our inheritance, a widespread custom of gambling. High and low, the people gambled: there were the hells for the aristocracy, where whole estates were lost in a single night; there were the smaller gaming tables, where the shopkeepers became bankrupt and the clerk played with stolen money. Every year there were lotteries, during which the whole nation went mad with the excitement of gambling. Where is that habit gone? There are now no hells, great or small. It is whispered that certain men gamble, but it is with closed doors; it is rumored that play is carried on here and

there for high stakes, but there is no mention of estates changing hands in a single night. The "Hooligan" and the lads of the gutter are gamblers, the Polish Jews are gamblers; men "back their fancy" for a horse race; but gambling, as a national vice, has been scotched, if not killed.

Again, we inherited a callous habit of brutal sports. We were encouraged by our predecessors to bait bull and bear, to draw the badger, to maintain the cockpit, to encourage the prize-ring. We have suppressed, in the interests of posterity, most of these amusements. The desire for them, even the memory of them, has vanished. The other day, I made certain inquiries as to the form and internal arrangements of the cockpit. I can hear of only two specimens surviving, and these are imperfect. Yet, a hundred years ago, there was not a village without its cockpit. Here, again, our work is good from a destructive point of view, but it is incomplete. We have swept away, with sports that were brutal, sports that were manly. It will be a part of the work of our successors to revive and to restore the latter. They will institute, in every town, physical education, under the guise of sport; the gymnasium, foot-racing, wrestling, athletics, even single-stick practice and boxing, will be restored to our lads, as part of the national training.

Again, we found our prisons hot-beds of infectious fever; in these horrible places, besides the criminals, there were languishing debtors, sometimes for a few shillings, locked up for life, doomed to semi-starvation. Every evil that one can imagine flourished in these abodes of despair. We have now cleansed our prisons; gaol fever is no more known; we have put an end to the more flagrant evils of the past. Next, we have tried our hands at prison discipline and prison reform. Our experiments in this branch of work have proved a series of horrible failures. There is no country in the world where the prison system is so hard, so cruel, so terrible, as our own; it is an ironclad system, which takes his manhood, his self-respect, his power of will, out of the wretch who serves his sentence. It leaves him pitifully submissive, slavishly docile. To watch this poor caitiff, on the day when he returns to the world, is to bring tears of pity and of shame to the eyes. We hand over this gigantic failure to our successors. "Do better," we say—"you cannot do worse—for the poor prisoners. While you make their punishment sharp and real, leave them their manhood and

the power of recovery. Not too much degradation, not too much—oh! my brothers!—for these poor backsliders!”

In the nature of communications, internal and oceanic, we may at least congratulate ourselves.

We inherited a fine system of high roads, a well appointed service of stage coaches, a good postal service, and a magnificent fleet of sailing vessels. We also inherited a population mainly rural, and practically tied to the soil. The people of one town saw nothing of any other town; foreign travel was unknown; the insular ignorance of our people, as regards foreign nations, was colossal. We have now introduced new methods of communication; we travel rapidly and cheaply; we travel all over our country, and all over the world. All classes travel. Parties of working-men are made up for the Continent. Board-school teachers are carried to Florence for a fortnight's study of art. The suburban shopman is met in Switzerland. The clerk runs all over the country in his three weeks' holiday. We can get across the Atlantic in a week: we can get all round the world in two months. If increased rapidity of communication is an advance in civilization we have truly advanced. Well, rapidity of communication should certainly be an instrument of advance. Yet our work is, after all, one of preparation. We have discovered a new force with which we have already done great things; we talk to each other across thousands of miles by means of it, we light our cities and our houses with it, we drive engines with it; we have only, so far, begun to understand its possibilities. It is for our successors to make this force a servant of humanity far more useful, far more obedient, far more intelligent than steam.

What will our successors do with this force? If one may be allowed to prophesy, I would point to our ships. We have increased their speed from six or eight knots an hour to five and twenty, or even thirty. Is there no simpler machinery than the steam-driven screw and the paddle? Perhaps. Consider the action of a duck: she flies over the water; she does not plough through it; she presents a smooth round breast, and she beats the surface rapidly with her strong pinions. The ship of the future will be shallow and round in build, like the duck; she will be provided with a row of wing-like propellers; she will not plough the waters, but will skim them with her electric wings, and her speed will be, not thirty knots, but a hundred and fifty; and it

will take no longer to get from Liverpool to New York than it now takes to get from London to Marseilles.

As regards law and its administration, we inherited a fine old cumbrous collection of courts and procedures. It seems difficult to understand how people could ever be induced to enter upon an action at law, considering the delays, the cost, and the doubt attending any action. A case dragged on for year after year, from one decade to another; the estate, meanwhile, was bleeding at every pore; the lawyer took all. The judges, for their part, accepted the situation; they even encouraged the delays, out of sympathy with their former brethren of the bar. We have improved things in this respect, but some of the cumbrous methods remain. The suitor cannot, as in the United States, place his case directly in the hands of the barrister, nor arrange with him as to the cost of proceedings, and—a formidable obstacle in the way of justice—he is always liable to pay the costs of the other side. In other words, justice for a poor man is, practically, still most difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, everything is done by the Courts themselves to make an action terrible and an ordeal even to the strongest. The witness is raised high above the whole court in a box, a position in itself most trying to a nervous person; and though the ancient bullying of the Bar has now become mitigated, some of it still exists; the traditions of brow-beating and terrifying a witness still remain. Moreover, there is, as I said, always that terrible danger of being ordered to pay the costs of the other side.

It will be for our successors to make justice accessible to every one, to remove the terrors of an action, to allow any one to plead in person, or to have direct access to a barrister; to plead *in formâ pauperis*; to be treated by the Bar with courtesy; not to be set in pillory above all the people; and no longer to be saddled with the danger of paying the costs of the other side. If these reforms are ever carried, it will be against the whole weight and influence of Bench and Bar, unless Bench and Bar change their present mind; but it will result in multiplying cases by the hundred—in other words, in causing the Courts of Law to be regarded as the natural arbitrators of every dispute, instead of a few only: in giving work to many hundreds of lawyers; in amalgamating the two branches; and all to the great advantage of the people, and to no loss of dignity, or of income, to the profession.

After the law, medicine. Here, indeed, we hand over a mass of work incomplete, but splendid with illustrious beginnings. We have introduced sanitary reforms into our towns, our streets, and our houses; we have cleansed and purified our hospitals; we have sent women back—with honor—to their old work of nursing, but nursing trained and scientific; we have learned how to see the very inside of a living man; we have discovered how, without giving him pain, to cut open any part of him, and to operate upon him for almost any length of time. The last discovery is beyond everything admirable and worthy of praise and thanksgiving. But it is commonly spoken of as the end, whereas it is only the beginning. The operation is painless—that is true; but, after the operation, where is then our anæsthetic? When the wounds have to be dressed—that is, daily—where is our anæsthetic? In the Hospitals, it is ready to hand and it is freely used; in the houses and in Nursing Homes, it cannot be used without setting in motion a whole machinery of doctors called in for the purpose. “Give us,” we say to our successors, “an anæsthetic which can be easily and readily applied in the long hours and days of pain that follow the operation, as well as in the agony intolerable of the operation itself. So will the bed of sickness lose its terrors, and the soul, if it has to leave the body, will not be torn out of it with throes of suffering, but will gently pass away in painless coma.”

There is a great deal more for medical students of the next century: we put into their hands, indeed, plenty of failures. We have failed to cure gout, asthma, rheumatism, cancer, consumption, and paralysis, without speaking of other “plaguy diseases” which afflict mankind. All that we can do at present is to recommend habits and diet which shall perhaps be preventive. We can cure none of these diseases. Will our successors prove more competent than ourselves? We have, at least, prepared the way for a more scientific treatment; we have discovered bacillus, and bacteria; we have invented antiseptic treatment. Perhaps, by their aid, our children will cease to regard disease as an evil which science may alleviate but can never remove. In no branch of intellectual endeavor does the sense of incompleteness weigh upon us so strongly as in the branch of medicine; yet in no branch have the achievements of the nineteenth century been more remarkable.

I must pass over much that remains. Our care of the poor has been another egregious failure. We have not made up our minds about out-door relief: we have made the "House" a prison; we have failed to devise a working scheme of pensions, and the respectable poor regard with horror the necessity of taking refuge in the gloomy mansion where the unfortunate paupers are ordered about like criminals, and ruled like schoolboys.

Let me advance one point more, and only one out of hundreds, could one find space enough. There is a question, as old as history itself, always disputed, never settled. This question should, if the present order continues, receive an answer during the present century. The question is whether political society is to be a machinery for enabling a few to keep the many in subjection; or whether every man shall be allotted his equal share in government, and his equal opportunities of working for the community. In other words, is government by the people possible? Is it desirable? Is it better for the people than government by an aristocracy? And shall it prevail?

It is not to us, nor to any European state, that the world looks for an answer to this most momentous question. It is to America, and to America alone, that we must look. You have now had for more than a hundred years a government by the people; it is not a passing experiment, like one of the many forms tried successively in France; it is a settled form; an American, even of the second generation, has it in his blood. We have had, as you have seen, an enormous amount of destructive legislation to get through before we could get the people into their place. You started without any obstructive caste. But the answer to the question proposed above must be based on a long experience. After two hundred years, let the world turn to America for an answer. Never before has the experiment of popular government been made on so great a scale, or for so long a time; never before have the conditions been free from caste, aristocracies or oligarchies.

It is a question the importance of which, to the future of humanity, cannot be exaggerated. Would that in the year 1999 or 2000 one could come back to earth, in order to hear the answer. May it be favorable to democracy. And may it be final!

WALTER BESANT.